

Reach Out and Pitch Someone

Human contact is an integral part of sales. Now, technology lets us touch not one person, but an entire world

According to Woody Allen, 80% percent of success is simply showing up. This is especially true in selling, where personal relationships with clients often determine which rep gets the order. In a perfect world, we would all have the time and resources to develop tight connections with each potential customer. Since that's impossible, the question is: How to make that human connection in less time, at a lower cost, and at a deeper level? I received a letter recently from one of my readers who had just driven over 2,000 miles that week, touching base with many long-time customers and adding a few new ones. That's a hard pace to keep up -- and all the downtime between appointments is wasteful.

PAIN, ALL VARIETIES. I've experienced this frustration first-hand as I fly around the world to speak. Sure, there are cell phones to keep you connected and audio books to stimulate the mind, but that's not enough. Travel is physically hard. Sure, it doesn't take much energy to sit in one place for a prolonged period, but the human body still rebels at those endless hours of enforced inactivity. Spending time on the road also imposes other pressures. None of us wants to miss our kids' school plays, soccer games, and band performances, but that's what we find ourselves doing to get the job done, build up the business, and see the mortgage paid.

A similar challenge is faced by businesses that want to connect with their own sales team. When organizations have branch offices scattered across a large geographic area, even the world, it's expensive to bring everyone together under the same roof to fine-tune selling skills, expand product knowledge, and build esprit de corps.

Add up all those plane tickets, hotel bills, and conference-center charges, and we're talking serious moola -- and that's before lost sales time is even taken into account. Yet untrained or poorly prepared reps are an expensive liability, if for no other reason than better-prepared outfits are always ready to capitalize on rivals' errors and oversights.

The challenge is how to grow your connections with customers and/or fellow sales-team members without commensurate increases in the time and money required to achieve that goal. The answer is to broaden your choices of connection tools. Cars, planes, mail, e-mail, and telephones aren't enough anymore.

NEW FRONTIERS. Technology offers many new ways to develop, maintain, and strengthen human connections. It's like the obnoxious student waving his hand and screaming, "Pick me! Pick me! I have the answer. Pick me!" I admit, I'm cautious in adopting high-tech gizmos and strategies. However, ignoring technology's offerings means trying to solve tomorrow's problems with yesterday's tools. I've had to change my attitude.

I have a friend who teaches "change management" and her mantra is: Change is good -- you go first! We say we want change but really, it frightens us. We've all heard of folks who tried new ways to connect with customers, only to see them backfire. However, sometimes staying with the old ways is as dangerous as trying the new.

We've seen this with e-mail addresses. Many businesses started out with an e-mail address on a major carrier. Now, businesses that don't have their own domain name are considered old-fashioned. In the future, companies that only sell over the phone or in person will also be considered behind the times.

WELCOME TO MY WEB. Recently, I got a first-hand taste of technology's potential for expanding human contact. An organization asked me to do a sales-training "Webinar." I replied, "Sure.

What's that?" They explained that they had people all over the U.S. who wanted to learn my strategies for growing sales.

At the appointed hour, members called up on telephones and computers from their offices or conference rooms. From my own office, I spoke over the telephone and presented my PowerPoint presentation over the Internet. The members heard my voice, saw my slides, and could Instant Message me with questions throughout the presentation. At the end, they were free to ask questions over the phone, just like a radio call-in show.

All the participants were miles apart, but the immediacy of the experience was such that we might as well have been all in the same room. When the hour was up, each student logged off, I hung up, and we all went back to our other work -- no travel, no meals, no lost time. It was a great way for me to connect with lots of people at a minimal cost.

ADAPT AND EVOLVE. The Webinar is just one example of using the Internet to connect. Sales reps could adapt the technique to deliver first-step presentations to identify far-away prospective customers. If an opportunity was unearthed, a follow-up telephone call might well lead to a flesh-and-blood visit.

AT&T used to have a slogan -- "Reach out and touch someone." In sales today, it's more important than ever that we reach out to prospects and keep in touch with our customers. Connecting doesn't have to be expensive, and using technology to enhance relationships can translate into faster, cheaper, and more profitable sales. Happy selling!

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